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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two programs for primary grade children designed to increase students' sense of self-esteem by enabling them to have a more successful school experience and to minimize maladaptive behavior related to school stress. The programs were developed as preventative programs to decrease later school problems. A Child-Aide program was initiated at the kindergarten level, and, after the first year, served 30 children from 10 kindergartens in three schools. The program involved the identification of children with potential school problems through teacher ratings and a parent questionnaire. An aide was hired to work individually with three of these children from each kindergarten class for 20-minute daily sessions. The second program involved weekly class meetings for first grade children. These meetings were designed to encourage the development of: (1) self-esteem and personal identity, (2) group identity, and (3) a sense of unity within the family. The meetings focused on ways in which the participants could help each other in resolving school problems. Parents were encouraged to attend each meeting. Followup studies indicated some positive results from the programs. In addition to describing the implementation and evaluation of the programs, the paper also discusses some of the problems and solutions involved in the development of new programs in a conservative community with limited funds. (BD)

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TWO INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS IN A SMALL TOWN IN IOWA

PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT, AND EVALUATION

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Introduction

Muscatine, Iowa, was a Mississippi River town with a population of 21,000 when I arrived in August, 1967. Census data from 1960 showed that the average family income was $5,000 per year; the average education was 9th grade; and the population was 99% white and 1% Chicano. School statistics showed that the public schools had a 25% drop-out rate and that less than 20% of the students who graduated from high school went on to complete a college program. In the face of these statistics, the curriculum of the local school district was almost entirely college preparatory. Social services in the community were provided by the State Department of Social Service, one general relief officer, one probation officer, community nurses, and a part-time volunteer counseling center staffed by five local ministers.

Muscatine was first settled in 1833 as a lumbering center and then began to grow as a center for the manufacture of pearl buttons. This was a piece-work industry which led to large numbers of people making a marginal living, a few wealthy families, and almost no middle class. Recently Muscatine has developed a diversified industrial base, and the middle class population has begun to expand. Chicano families have been settling out of the migrant stream and the population is now approximately 3% Chicano. There is also a sprinkling of black families. A wide range of social services are now available.

The community has remained conservative both politically and philosophically. The school system reflects this as it continues to emphasize a college preparatory curriculum. In the fall of 1977 the school board expressed concern about the drop-out rate and has begun to re-examine their curriculum.

In 1967 I was hired by an intermediate educational unit to provide social work service to all students in Muscatine County. With administrative appro-

val, I defined my role as one of providing priority service to students in kindergarten through third grades and spending up to 50% of my time in developing preventative programs. It was within that framework that I developed the two programs that are presented in this paper.

Each of these programs was adapted by me from comprehensive models that were developed with federal grants. The child-aide program that I utilized at the kindergarten level was originated by the Primary Mental Health Project in Rochester, New York.[1,2] The first grade class meetings were developed by the Woodlawn Mental Health Center in Chicago, Illinois.[3] My initial planning was to select from those highly sophisticated models the ingredients that appeared to be basic, could be accepted by a conservative community, and could be carried out by one person on a part-time basis. The primary purpose of both programs was to increase students' sense of self-esteem by enabling them to have a more successful school experience, and minimize maladaptive behavior related to school stress. The purpose was not to change the school system although it was hoped that some impact on individual teachers would accrue as a by-product.

For practical reasons, three schools in Muscatine were selected for these programs. They were initiated first in one of these three schools, and I would like to pay particular tribute to Mr. Jerry Lange, principal, for his

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1. Louis D. Izzo, "The Rochester City School District Primary Mental Health Project" Protection and Promotion of Positive Mental Health in the Schools (Des Moines, Iowa: State of Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1968) pp. 18-34.

2. Mary Ann Trost, "The Rochester City School District Primary Mental Health Project" Protection and Promotion of Positive Mental Health in the Schools (Des Moines, Iowa: State of Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1968) pp. 35-43.

3. S.K. Schiff and S.G. Kellam, "A Community-wide Mental Health Program of Prevention and Early Treatment in First Grade" Psychiatric Research Report No. 21 (American Psychiatric Association, 1967).

active support and cooperation. A parent questionnaire was developed and a teacher rating scale developed by the Woodlawn Mental Health Center were used to identify the children served by child-aides in kindergarten. Since school success correlated positively with mental health, and a stated goal of the programs was an increase in school success, evaluation was based on the scores of standardized tests given routinely to all students in the Muscatine School System. This was supplemented by continued use of the teacher rating scale. Control groups were utilized for comparison.

The Child-Aide Program

In December, 1967, Jerry Lange attended a workshop with me sponsored by the State Department of Public Instruction. Mary Ann Trost, school social worker, and Louis Izzo, school psychologist from Rochester, New York, spoke about the "Rochester Mental Health Project" and the Child-Aide component. We decided to explore the feasibility of introducing Child-Aides into the kindergartens at Franklin School for the following school year.

January through June, 1968, was a time of active preparation. A questionnaire was developed that parents completed at kindergarten registration. A formal proposal was written that was presented to both the Joint County School System, where I was employed, and the Muscatine Community School District. It was approved by both administrations and school boards.

The proposal stated that the Joint County School System hire a Child-Aide as a paid-volunteer to work individually with three children from each kindergarten class at Franklin School for 20 minutes daily from November 1 through May 31. The children to be served were to be selected from the parent questionnaire and a rating scale completed by the teacher at the end of the first nine weeks of school. The teacher and I would select the three children who

both appeared to be at risk in having a successful school experience as well as being most likely to benefit from the program. Parental permission would be required prior to providing the service.

The objective of the program was to provide the child with a warm, nurturing relationship within which the child would feel of value and achieve some school success. It was my responsibility to recruit and supervise the Child-Aide from outside the area served by Franklin School in order to help maintain confidentiality. There were two basic requirements of the aide. The first was the ability to relate warmly and sensitively to five-year-old children. This could be demonstrated either through their own families, or through volunteer or paid work experience. The second was the capacity to work within a public school, following both school and classroom rules. This was evaluated in an interview. Pay ($10 per week for each three children served) was planned to cover slightly more than expenses and to provide a contractual agreement that would help ensure continuity of service for the entire school year.

During the 1968-69 school year the Joint County School System brought Mary Ann Trost to Muscatine for a two-day workshop for kindergarten teachers, administrators, and support personnel. The parent questionnaire was revised to include only those items where the responses clustered in a way that made it possible to identify the lowest 10% of the class. Plans were finalized to continue the program without any significant change except to expand it to two additional elementary schools and to split the funding between the Joint School System and the Muscatine Community School District. This program then continued without change through June, 1972. Each year 30 children from 10 kindergarten classes in the three schools were served.

First Grade Class Meetings

Jerry Lange, the Muscatine Community School Board and the Superintendent of Schools expressed the wish that continued service be provided to the kindergarten students at Franklin School when they entered the first grade in the fall of 1969. I suggested to Jerry Lange that we explore the First Grade Intervention program that had been developed by the Woodlawn Mental Health Center in Chicago, Illinois, as an alternative to extending the Child-Aide Program. Permission and funding was secured from both school systems for a one-day visit to the Woodlawn Mental Health Center. Jerry Lange, principal of Franklin School; Marge Van Camp, first grade teacher at Franklin School; Harold Bridges, school psychologist; and I made the trip in October, 1969. After the visitation we made a decision to implement weekly class meetings from January through May of 1970 in Mrs. Van Camp's first grade classroom. This decision was approved by both school systems, and a meeting was held with the parents of all of the students involved to interpret the program.

The stated objectives of the class meetings were to enable the first grade child to develop (1) a strong, positive sense of personal identity and self-esteem, including the capacity for self-evaluation and a committed interest in learning; (2) a sense of group identity, and (3) a sense of unity in the family around his role as a student. It was hoped that teachers would become more aware of the mental health needs of students as well as increasing their knowledge and skills in group process. We also anticipated an increased ability on the part of parents to appropriately support their children as students in school.

These class meetings differed from similar programs in two respects. First, parents were encouraged to participate in as many of the meetings as

possible. Second, the purpose of the meetings was to focus on ways in which the participants could help each other in resolving those problems which affected the child's ability to function effectively in his job as a first grade student.

This program was expanded in the 1970-71 school year to all the first grade classrooms in the three schools that had the kindergarten child-aide program and also to the second grade classes in Franklin School. The format remained the same. In the fall, the two school systems sponsored a one-day workshop in Muscatine for administrators and support personnel, conducted by Douglas Turner from the Woodlawn Mental Health Center. Between January and May 1971, Dr. Sheldon K. Schiff conducted three seminars utilizing videotapes of class meetings for school board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents.

Beginning in the fall, 1971, the direction I have pursued has been to shift my role from a co-leader to that of a teacher trainer and a resource person to teachers that had been involved in the program, and to extend the program to other schools and other grade levels where an interest was expressed. As that change has occurred some classes have discontinued the program, some have modified it, and others have initiated it. In almost all situations the schools have discontinued the active involvement of parents.

Evaluation

It was necessary to evaluate the teacher rating scale to see if it could be used as one instrument in evaluating the programs. There were 191 students who entered the first grade in September, 1970, and remained in the Muscatine School System through June, 1977. The purpose of the teacher rating scale was to identify those students who were "at risk" in the school system, and so I decided to use the number of referrals made for psychological services between

those dates as the criteria for establishing face validity. The teacher was asked to rate each student on the following six dimensions: socialization, concentration, maturity, acceptance of authority, mental ability, and overall adaptation. The scoring was: 0 for okay, 1 for a mild problem, 2 for a moderate problem, and 3 for a severe problem. The range for each student then was between 0 and 18. The scores divided the students into two natural groups as rated by the first grade teacher. Students with scores of 7 and below were placed in the low-risk group. Students with scores of 8 and above were placed in the high-risk group. Sixteen percent of the low-risk group were later referred for psychological services while 76% of the high-risk group were later referred. It was felt that this instrument, which a teacher could complete for an entire class in one-half hour, did have face validity. The other scores used were from instruments which were administered to all students in the Muscatine School System in second grade. These were the Lorge-Thorndike Group Intelligence I.Q. scores and the stanines from the Stanford Achievement Tests.

The Child-aide program was difficult to evaluate. The children served had average I.Q.'s which were 12 points lower than the remainder of their class and they were achieving 1.2 stanines below the remainder of the class in second grade. The teacher rating done at the same time was essentially the same for both groups, which led to the conclusion that there were some benefits to the students who were in the program. It was clear that teachers, parents, and the students all liked the program. The Superintendent of Schools stated that if it was to be continued after June, 1972, it needed to be available to the entire school system. Since this did not seem to be a desirable use of time and money when the measurable gains were so small, the program was discontinued.

In order to evaluate the first grade class meetings, a control group was established of students from the same schools who were one grade higher than the experimental group. The two groups of students drew from the same community and had the same teachers. In addition the average I.Q. score for the experimental group was 101.86 and for the control group was 101.00.

The experimental group obtained slightly higher scores on the achievement test than did the control group. This was particularly striking in the area of reading where the difference on the stanines was .151. This is significant at the .005 level of confidence. The second grade teacher rating scale showed a .90 decrease in the number and severity of problems when compared to the ratings made by the first grade teacher before the program started. It can therefore be stated with confidence that this program of 17 half-hour class meetings had a positive effect on both reading skills and behavior one year later.

The first grade meetings have had some opposition. Teachers are uncomfortable leading a meeting where parents are included and although the total time involved was 8½ hours out of the school year, it does make one additional task. Some parents were concerned with the question of whether this constituted group therapy and its possible negative effects on the students. The students themselves almost unanimously liked the meetings, felt that they benefited from them and would choose to have them throughout the school year. As a result, the class meetings continue to occur in those schools and classrooms that wish to hold them and more teachers are assuming the responsibility for leading the meetings independently.

Summary

It is clear that it is possible to establish new programs in schools in

a conservative community faced with limited funds. The following ingredients appear to be essential: (1) careful planning, including the choice of acceptable language; (2) identifying the program as one designed to help achieve the stated goals of the system, (3) proceeding at a rate that all segments of the system can absorb without an excessive level of discomfort, and (4) establishing a method to evaluate the results. In addition to the above, neither program could have proceeded beyond the planning stage without the active support of the building principal, and I would like to again give credit to Jerry Lange for filling this role beyond any necessity other than his own committment to the students in his building.